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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DAMASCUS 000665

SIPDIS

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PARIS FOR WALLER; LONDON FOR TSOU

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/12/2015
TAGS: PGOV PREL SY
SUBJECT: DEMARCHE DELIVERED TO SARG ON FOREIGN FIGHTERS

REF: STATE 91551

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Michael Corbin, per 1.4 b,d.

¶1. (C) Summary: Charge delivered reftel points on the
foreign fighter issue July 2 to FM Walid Mu'allim's office
director, Bassam Sabbagh. Sabbagh did not offer any official
response but noted this was not a new issue and that the SARG
did not want to cooperate on a few limited issues without a
broader "political umbrella." He also complained about USG
failure to follow-up after the Sharm talks, USG criticisms of
the presidential referendum, the recently announced
Presidential proclamation on visas, and the incident
involving the family of Syrian Permrep Jafari. Separately
Charge pressed Bassam for an answer on the delayed visas for
teachers for the Damascus Community School (the U.S. Embassy
school). Charge noted this was turning into a major issue
which we counted on the MFA to resolve. Bassam promised to
work on the issue. End Summary.

¶2. (C) Charge delivered reftel points July 2 to Bassam
Sabbagh, FM Mu'allim's chef de cabinet. Charge strongly
underlined the problem that foreign fighters posed in Iraq,
killing large numbers of civilians and coalition forces while
undermining stability, and underscored the to date
half-hearted efforts the SARG had made to address the
problem. Referring to demarche points, Charge listed the
steps Syria could take to show it was serious about stopping
the flow of foreign fighters. He noted particularly the need
for the SARG to implement entrance requirements that would
stop the entrance into Syria of single male travelers from
the Arab world and Pakistan who enter Syria without a valid
reason for travel.

¶3. (C) Sabbagh responded initially by inquiring whether the
demarche was being delivered in other capitals which served
as the sources for foreign fighter, which Charge confirmed.
He noted that he did not have an official response to deliver
but committed to getting back to Charge after he had briefed
the FM if there was to be an official response. Speaking
unofficially, Sabbagh raised several issues. First, he noted
that at the April Sharm talks between the FM and the
Secretary the Syrian side had insisted on the need for "a

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political umbrella," to prevent inconsistencies where Syria
cooperated with the U.S. on certain issues and the U.S.
criticized and made accusations against Syria at the same
time on other issues. (He noted that the FM had also called
for the return of a U.S. Ambassador to Damascus.) Since
Sharm, according to Sabbagh, the U.S. had not followed up.
He insisted for example that the SARG had invited senior

State officials to come to Damascus to further discuss Iraq issues and had heard nothing further.

¶4. (C) Sabbagh also took issue with USG statements on the late May presidential referendum, pointing for example to one which described it as "vanilla" and called these statements inappropriate and insulting to Syria's dignity, and representing an unacceptable interference into Syria's internal affairs.   In addition, Sabbagh raised the recent Presidential proclamation restricting entry into the U.S. for persons undermining Lebanon's sovereignty. Raising a separate issue, Sabbagh lifted a copy of the most recent Trafficking in Persons reports, complaining about the critical language on Syria, especially regarding Iraqi refugees. Finally, Sabbagh raised the issue of the June 22 treatment of Syrian Permrep Bashar Jafari's family at JFK, which the Charge said was under investigation.

¶5. (C) Specifically on the foreign fighter issue, Sabbagh said "this is not a new issue," and claimed that while the Syrian side had taken action, others in the region, including Iraq itself, had not. The Charge pushed back, asking Sabbagh why the Syrians were not allowing the border security working group to convene and urged the SARG to follow up with an official response and actions on the ground.

¶6. (C) On a separate issue, the Charge raised with Sabbagh the SARG's refusal to date to issue residency visas for some 30 teachers at the Embassy-affiliated Damascus Community School (DCS), emphasizing that the SARG needed to take action soon or it would in effect be closing down an international school that had operated in Syria for the past 50 years. Such an action would not only impact on Embassy operations, but would also reverberate negatively for Syria in the wider diplomatic and international business communities in Syria.

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Sabbagh expressed personal sympathy on the school issue. Unofficially he raised as issues both the Ministry of Education wanting more control of the school and the fallout from the death of a Syrian student on a school trip in 2006. The Charge reiterated the importance of the school and urged the SARG to move quickly on the visa issue to signal that it did not intend to close the school. Bassam promised to personally work to resolve this issue.

¶7. (C) COMMENT: In the current state of Syrian retrenchment on all fronts, it is interesting that Sabbagh would cite our public statements on the referendum as one of their main issues of concern. Despite multiple critical statements over the past year, our pointed statements on the referendum seem to have really hit home. It shows how much the issues of image, respect, and dignity are important for the Bashar regime. And even with this criticism, it was not so much the substance of the criticism but what Sabbagh called an inappropriate, ridiculing tone, the reference to vanilla or vanilla as illustrative of the lack of political choice, that really bothered the Syrians.

CORBIN